DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 138 400 RC 009 853

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TITLE Chicano Culture and Decision Making.
PUB DATE 25 Feb 77
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the AASA Annual Meeting (Las Vegas, Nevada, February 25, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Changing Attitudes; Community Involvement; Curriculum; *Decision Making; *Education; Educational Programs; Instructional Innovation; Labeling (of Persons); *Mexican Americans; *Parent Participation; *Parent School Relationship; School Personnel; Socioeconomic Background
IDENTIFIERS *Chicanos

ABSTRACT

Until recently, the Chicano was strongly influenced by the Mexican cultural tradition that looks on the school as an institution where decisions regarding his children were not to be questioned. The teacher's word was law and children were expected to be respectful, obedient and hardworking. It was unthinkable to go to the school to question their actions, the curriculum, discipline, or any other aspect of the education program. However, today the Mexican American parents are not only questioning the education program, but are actively demanding a say in those decisions that closely affect the welfare of their children. Educators have to be willing to assume and to share in the Chicano parent's genuine concern for his child's welfare. No topic can be considered inappropriate for discussion either by individual parents or by groups that include Chicanos interested in the school and its program. Some areas about which [illegible]nts can help to make decisions are: curriculum, community involvement, evaluation, tutorial programs, instructional innovations, personnel, Federal program guidelines, legislation, recreation, goals and objectives, and teacher in-service. This communication between Chicano parents and school officials is a recognition of the desires of many parents for changes in educational patterns and traditions. (NQ)

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PRESENTER: Rudy Valdez, superintendent, South Bay Union School District, Imperial Beach, CA
TOPIC: "Chicano Culture and Decision Making"
TIME: Friday, Feb. 25, 2:00 p.m.
PLACE: Room B-3, Convention Center, Las Vegas
PROGRAM: Page 31

I have been asked to speak to you today on "Chicano Culture and Decision Making". I'm not quite sure what it was that the person had in mind who decided on this topic. But I am going to proceed on two assumptions: (1) that most of you here know very little about Chicanos, and (2) that you are present because you want to know more.

First of all, then, what does the term "Chicano" mean? While you can probably get a variety of definitions depending upon who you talk to, I am going to define it as, simply, a person whose ancestors were born in Mexico. For our purposes, I am making the term synonymous with Mexican American, Spanish American, American of Mexican Descent, and even just plain Mexican. And yet you cannot really understand the Chicano unless you realize that for him--and for the Anglo society in which he lives--there may be some very important distinctions in these terms. So we need to spend a little time looking at each of these and in the process help to arrive at a definition that serves our purposes and on which we can all agree.

If we proceed to define these distinctions in socio-political terms it might be possible to arrange them in a left-to-right continuum with all that such a classification implies. Thus, on the extreme left you have the Chicano himself. With him, this term connotes--especially among the young--a fierce pride in his Mexican origins, a determination to preserve his culture and language at all costs, at the same time that he learns and uses English, a refusal to accept a second class status, and an insistence, upon the equal

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application to him of all the rights and privileges--and duties,--of any other American.

At the other extreme, you have the individual who thinks of himself as an American--only incidentally of Mexican origin--and who is virtually indistinguisable except, perhaps, in appearance, from any other American. He is likely to be a person of good education--a professional--and, more than likely, in the upper income brackets. He moves mostly in Anglo circles, probably has an anglo wife, may even be--God forbid! --Republican, and has severed virtually all cultural ties with his Mexican orgins.

Between these two extreme lie varying degrees of identification with two cultures and somewhere in the middle the Mexican-American in whose home both English and Spanish are spoken, where hamburgers are eaten just as often as tacos, where a blend of the Mexican and American cultures have resulted in an individual who feels fairly confortable in both and probably has no very strong feelings one way or the other. In this context, the Chicano is very active in the promotion and preservation of those aspects of Mexican culture that he considers of extreme value; the Mexican American admires those cultural attributes but is rather passive about it; and the American of Mexican descent probably very seldom thinks about the matter at all.

Why, then, am I using the term "Chicano" for all of these individuals. They all have one thing in common: each of them has ancestors who came from Mexico. Because of this, the society in which they live tends to make some assumptions about them that affect their lives in some extremely important ways:

> "...the Anglo American's principal assumptions and expectations emphasize the Mexicans' inferiority... since they are so obviously inferior their present subordinate status is appropriate and really their own fault. There is a ready identification between Mexicans and menial labor, buttressed by the image of the Mexican worker as improvident, undependable, irresponsible, childlike, and indolent...Associated with the assumption of Mexican inferiority is that... all Mexicans are alike [which] buttresses the assumption of inferiority by making it convenient to ignore the fact of the existence of a substantial number of Mexican-Americans who represent all levels of business and professional achievement. Such people are considered exceptions to the rule. [1]

The term "Chicano," then, for the purposes of this paper, defines that individual--ordinarily called simply "Mexican"--about whom the assumptions listed above are held by many Anglo Americans. For those who hold such beliefs it matters little that Chicanos may be rich or poor (although, admittedly, most are poor); that they can be Republicans or Democrats; Catholic or Protestant, illiterates and Ph.Ds; passive or aggressive; skilled or unskilled; an urban dweller or a farm worker; likeable or hateful; that there are, in short, as many variations among Chicanos as among any other group and to speak of the Chicano or the Mexican American is just as valid and logical as it is to speak of the Anglo or the American or the

Black. Such classifications have, obviously, only the most general of applications.

Let's talk, for a moment, about Chicanos in the aggregate. If we accept the rather broad definition of Chicano that I have suggested, we can estimate fairly accurately that there are close to six million for the entire United States with the majority of these concentrated in the five southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas.

The number of Chicanos is increasing more rapidly than those of other groups. Between 1950 and 1960, for example, the Chicano population in the southwest increased by 51% compared with 39 percent in the total population of that region.

The Chicano has been in the United States for a long time. Eleven years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, a settlement was begun in what is now Santa Fe, New Mexico. At the time of the first United States census in 1790, there were approximately 23,000 Spanish-surnames persons being in what became the Southwestern states of the United States. In various censuses the Chicano has been labeled in a variety of ways. In the 1930 census he was counted as a separate race; he numbered about 1.3 million. He was called a "person of Spanish mother tongue" in 1940 by which time his numbers had grown to 1.6 million. In 1950 the classification changed again, this time to "persons of Spanish surname" who numbered, by then, 2.3 million;

this number rose to 3.5 million by 1960.

Generally, Chicanos tend to live in cities with the greatest concentrations, in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (over one million); San Antonio (1/2 million), San Francisco-Oakland (1/4 million) and El Paso (1/4 million).

Contrary to popular belief, Chicanos are not predominately in agriculture. There has been a continous movement from unskilled jobs to more skilled positions in a variety of areas. Today, the majority (some 60%) are employed in factories, mines, and construction, some 15% in agriculture, about 10% in service occupations; and approximately 15% in professional and clerical positions.

In education Chicanos have made some headway with more and more becoming teachers, counsellors and administrators. However, in terms of the total population both their numbers and percentages are still low.

As far as income is concerned, Chicanos have made a little improvement in the last decade with their real income falling somewhere above blacks generally but still considerably below that of the average Anglo. While some gains have been made in education by Chicanos they still lag behind the Anglo and other minorities in average number of school years completed.

Somewhat more that half of Chicano families own their own homes but their dwellings tend to be generally substandard in comparison to those owned by Anglo families.[2]

Obviously, to attempt to capsulize a people by such a casual summary is both unfair and misleading. The point is, however, that educators cannot afford either to ignore the existence of the Chicano or insist that they adapt to a system that has not met their needs. What then, does all this have to do with the Chicano culture and decision making?

I think we can approach the question from the standpoint of the Chicano as he views the decision-making process in the educational establishment.

To understand his viewpoint, it is necessary to be aware that, up until fairly recent times, he was strongly influenced by the Mexican cultural tradition that looks upon the school as an institution where decisions respecting his children were not to be questioned. The word of "el profesor" and "la profesora" was law and children were expected to be respectful, obedient, and hardworking. Since "los profesores" are educated professional people it was unthinkable that one were to go to school to question their actions, the curriculum, discipline, or any other aspect of the education program. For many years then, actions which we as educators took to try to meet the needs of Chicano children went largely unquestioned. I think those of you who have any contact with Chicano parents will agree that that has changed. Today, such parents are not only questioning some of our practices but actively demanding

a say in those decisions that affect so closely the welfare of their child.

The Chicano parent is not unique in this. Such direct involvement in school affiars cuts across ethnic, social, and economic lines. Parents express an ever-increasing concern about the job we are doing of teaching children the skills they need to have to survive in a rapidly changing society.

If we recognize this, it appears to me that we can best meet such a challenge by making certain that the PTA's, the advisory committees, and other school-related groups, include a representational number of Chicano parents who can take part in making those decisions that will result in better educational programs for their children. I believe we have to be willing to assume and to share in the Chicano parent's genuine concern for his child's welfare. That being the case, we can consider no topic inappropriate for discussion either by individual parents or by groups that include Chicanos interested in the school and its program.

Let me suggest some areas in which meaningful dialogue can take place about which parents can help to make decisions:

I. Curriculum

Many Chicano parents are aware that curriculum is too often seen by their children as inappropriate, irrelevant, outdated, or meaningless. As evidence of the accuracy of this viewpoint, parents cite high drop-out rates, the functional illiteracy

of many high school graduates, and the failure of the schools to provide their children with saleable skills. I think it is our responsibility to provide Chicano parents with full information on curriculum practices as well as possible alternatives to existing programs.

II. Community Involvement

The desire of Chicano parents to take a more active role in activities affecting the general welfare must be facilitated and encouraged by school administrators. The plaint of many educators that Chicano parents are not interested in school is no longer valid (some are complaining of parental interference). Personnel, facilities, and expertise must be made available by the schools to those parents wishing to become involved.

III. Evaluation

Chicano parents are always concerned about the means by which children's success in school is determined. While they are familiar with report cards, they are not always sure of the meaning of indicators used in those cards. They have many questions about state-wide test results, especially in the area of reading. They are concerned about cum-folders and the information they contain. Educators can do much to dispel many misconceptions about evaluation by taking part in discussions about them. They can also be ready to make changes where a desire for such changes is indicated by parents.

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IV. Tutorial Programs

More and more Chicano parents are becoming aware of tutoring programs being instituted in the schools. Not only do they want to know about cross-grade and parent volunteer tutoring, many want to take part in such programs. While leadership in this area usually comes from the school, parent groups themselves may well initiate such action either within or outside of the school. In either case, the school administrator should be prepared to render whatever assistance is necessary to make such programs successful.

V. Instructional Innovation

The school administrator has an important role to play in sharing with Chicano parents information about his instructional program. He also needs to be aware of their desires to see new approaches to instruction instituted in the school. Equally important, however, is his responsibility to report factually the results of any innovations. In too many cases, reports on recently-adopted programs turn into sessions of self-praise on approaches that have not been fully evaluated.

VI. Personnel Matters

Considerable strife can occur wher parents attempt to assume some say in the area of personnel. Not only do teachers feel threatened, administrators fear erosion of their power. The fact that this is a highly controversial and sensitive area

should not, however, prevent its being a topic for discussion by Chicano parents. The administrator who refuses to discuss the matter on purely legal grounds is likely to court strong negative reactions.

VII. Federal Program Guidelines

ESEA Title I Guidelines mandate the establishment of school-community groups in those schools where such programs exist. Chicano parents need to be involved. The guidelines are very specific about the roles and responsibilities of parents in these areas. Among the legal obligations is the responsibility of "signing off" program and funding applications. Such "sign offs" imply that the advisory group has taken an active part in the development of the proposed program. Full discussion of guidelines is certainly an advisory group responsibility that must be facilitated by the district and school administration.

VIII. Legislation

Local, state, and federal legislation affecting education should be presented and discussed at meetings of Chicano parents. While some groups may have a politically sophisticated member with access to information on such legislation, the school administrator is usually looked to for guidance in these matters. If he is called upon to furnish information on legislation, the administrator has the obligation to present conflicting viewpoints as objectively as possible.

IX. Recreation

The role of recreation activities and facilities in the education of children would appear to be a very important subject for discussion by Chicano parent groups. Such sessions can be made more meaningful and productive by making sure that professional recreation personnel are included.

X. Goals and Objectives

The development of meaningful, attainable goals for the school and the community should be a vital part of deliberations by Chicano parents. Here, too, the school administrator can do much to help. Without attempting to dictate what the goals should be, he can serve as a resource person in outlining means of stating as well as achieving the objectives decided upon by the group.

XI. Teacher In-Service

Parent groups cannot only be told about but may suggest topics appropriate for in-service training of teachers. Many community leaders are aware of areas of need that may not be so readily apparent to school personnel. In discussion of this topic valuable suggestions for teacher growth could well be forthcoming.

This list of topics which you might consider appropriate for discussion with your Chicano parents and the comments that follow

each item reflect no other authority than my own personal biases. They are an attempt to put into concrete terms my personal belief that the direction of education today makes inevitable the ever-increasing direct involvement by members of the Chicano community in school affairs. While the more affluent can--to some extent, at least--try to solve the problem of the best possible education for their young by moving to the suburbs, the Chicano generally has no such option. Faced with educational systems that have too often failed to give their children what they feel they should have, Mexican Americans demanding a voice in those decisions which most closely affect their children's success or failure. They are very serious about this. In the metropolitan centers of the east, the refusal of school administrators to recognize the reality of this drive has led to unprecedented strife. Similar difficulties can be prevented in the Southwest only if educators recognize that more than lip service must be paid to the concept of Chicano involvement in the decision making process.

Communication between Chicano parents and school officials is a recognition of the desires of many parents for changes in educational patterns and traditions. Recognition of the right of parents to discuss any topic they deem pertinent is an acceptance of their role as harbingers of change and strong supporters of schools and school people.

NOTES

1. Ozzie G. Simmons, "The Mutual Images and Expectations of Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans" in Edward Semmen, Pain, and Promise; The Chicano Today, New York, New American Library, C. 1972. P.109.

2. Bureau of the Census, "We, the Mexican American", op. cit. p. 45 ff.